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DISASTER, DISPLACEMENT, AND VOLUNTOURISM  
Helping Narratives of College Student Volunteers in Post-Katrina New Orleans

by  
Mary Elizabeth Smithson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2014

Approved by

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## ABSTRACT

### Disaster, Displacement, and Voluntourism: Helping Narratives of College Student Volunteers in Post-Katrina New Orleans

This thesis is an ethnographic study of volunteer tourists' motivations for contributing to the ongoing recovery of the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, LA. While it has been nearly a decade since Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, there is still much work to be done. The urgency that once accompanied the chaotic environment of a post-disaster landscape does not exist anymore. In effect, the strategies for recuperating from the hurricane's impacts mirror this shift from an urgent disaster state to a stabilized recovery state. Instead of issuing direct relief to people, recovery efforts are presently focused on addressing long term concerns such as rebuilding communities and neighborhoods, attracting people to return to New Orleans, and protecting the city against future floods and hurricane damage. Arguably, the idea of voluntourism, or volunteer tourism, is relevant to the operation of long term recovery strategies, especially for organizations that rely on unpaid labor for completing their projects and goals. Additionally, voluntourism is an enterprise requiring deeper critical examination than the current literature has to offer. The relationship among disaster capitalism, displacement of people, and the Lower Ninth Ward form the contextual foundation for investigating voluntourism. The research question for this thesis asks: once urgent demands for relief subside after a catastrophic event (like Hurricane Katrina), what attracts volunteer tourists to continue contributing to recovery efforts, and how do their helping narratives create, perpetuate, or mitigate existing social power structures and issues within local communities? Analyses of individual motivations have shown that an altruistic desire to help is the most reported reason for engaging in voluntourism. This "helping" narrative

appears in individual accounts, in the mottos of community organizations, and in tourism promotions of voluntourism. Despite altruistic intentions to “do good” and help others, the prevalence of helping narratives can potentially perpetuate the divisions between “us” (voluntourists) and “them” (locals/community members) which could have problematic implications for how voluntourists involve themselves in host communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the aftermath of Katrina in August 2005, grassroots organizations like neighborhood coalitions, charities, and nonprofits offer a localized take on providing recovery solutions for disadvantaged communities within the city of New Orleans. These community-involved organizations promote ideals of listening, understanding, and willingness to work with residents to alleviate the issues within their neighborhoods. A significant body of research exists regarding the “effectiveness” of community-based organizations in addressing the issues faced by residents of vulnerable neighborhoods. This thesis focuses on how some organizations in the New Orleans area have utilized a place-based strategy termed voluntourism in order to keep the long-term effects of Hurricane Katrina in the consciousness of society and maintain a steady flow of free labor (i.e., volunteers).

I critically examine the idea of voluntourism and the role that volunteer tourists play in ongoing recovery efforts in the Lower Ninth Ward. Throughout this thesis, I am exploring a multilayered research question: once urgent demands for relief subside after a catastrophic event (i.e., Hurricane Katrina), what attracts volunteer tourists to continue contributing to recovery efforts, and how do their helping narratives create, perpetuate, or mitigate existing social power structures and issues within local communities? To approach this question directly, I embarked on a week-long stay with a nonprofit organization in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans—Common Ground Relief—in early January 2014. Through participant observation, recorded field notes, semi-

structured interviews, and surveys/questionnaires, I gathered useful, though not exhaustive, data for examining motivations and experiences of eight voluntourists, the daily goals and operations of this particular nonprofit, and personal accounts of my experiences with voluntourism.

Coming from an anthropological perspective, I am interested in seeing how ethnography will illustrate my findings as well as how it will allow me to be self-reflexive in recognizing the trials and tribulations of fieldwork. According to the definition of Sociocultural Anthropology on the American Anthropological Association's website:

Sociocultural anthropologists examine social patterns and practices across cultures, with a special interest in how people live in particular places and how they organize, govern, and create meaning. A hallmark of sociocultural anthropology is its concern with similarities and differences, both within and among societies, and its attention to race, sexuality, class, gender, and nationality. Research in sociocultural anthropology is distinguished by its emphasis on participant observation, which involves placing oneself in the research context for extended periods of time to gain a first-hand sense of how local knowledge is put to work in grappling with practical problems of everyday life and with basic philosophical problems of knowledge, truth, power, and justice. (American Anthropological Association, 2014)

I want to examine how voluntourists create meaning through their helping narratives and through their interactions in destination host communities. By paying attention to “race..class, gender, and nationality,” the demographics of these voluntourists are of particular interest in relation to the contrasting demographics of communities that host voluntourists. Through participant observation, I utilized my first-hand perspective as a voluntourist to examine how this experience places pressure on the voluntourist to take pride in the voluntary work that we do, even if it does not incorporate the labor of locals or directly benefit the communities in which we work.

With the long-standing tradition of ethnography in anthropological writing, I frame my experiences within a particular autoethnographic account of living in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans for a week among other voluntourists. I observed the day-to-day interactions and occurrences of a group of voluntourists who had travelled from all over the United States to New Orleans. I utilized thick description techniques in my field notes to paint a rich, continuous portrait of what happened during the week. From these field notes, I inferred cultural meanings about the interplay between voluntourists of the Western world in a Western context (New Orleans, LA). As outsiders to New Orleans and strangers to each other, it was interesting to observe how voluntourists constructed their purposes and intentions for volunteering in a place so detached from their home lives.

I begin this paper by reviewing the initial impacts of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in Chapter I. Then, in Chapters II, III, and IV, I delve into a literature review that offers a historical analysis of the Lower Ninth Ward, a discussion of disaster capitalism and human displacement in New Orleans, and an examination of the existing literature that is relevant to voluntourism.

In Chapter V, I discuss my methods for how I collected my data as well as the benefits and limitations of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and surveys. As a means of interpreting my data, I utilized coding strategies to highlight recurring themes within my four interview transcriptions and four surveys, discovering that “helping” narratives largely flavored each response.

I construct an ethnographic portrayal of my first impressions of my voluntourism experience in Chapter VI. In Chapter VII, I expose my autoethnographic depiction of what happened daily at Common Ground and how I understood my position as the researcher during my voluntourism stay. Chapter VIII presents the demographic profiles of eight voluntourists, arguing that certain demographic categories, such as education, age, race, and regional identity, are common indicators of *who* typically engages in voluntourism. Afterward, in Chapter IX, I critique individuals' accounts about their perceptions of a vulnerable place: New Orleans. Chapter X exposes how the "helping" narratives of voluntourists can potentially perpetuate the "us" vs. "them" binary, which can turn host communities into the "other" and create problematic tensions between voluntourists and locals.

I will conclude this thesis by talking about how the growing trend of voluntourism needs more critical attention as a topic of study and how voluntourists, voluntourism organizations, and tourism agencies can better equip themselves with the proper tools and mindsets to engage in, conduct, and promote ethical volunteer work. Overall, this thesis adds original insights to the existing body of literature on voluntourism by contributing a critical analysis of voluntourism (Holmes et al. 2009), offering a qualitative examination of voluntourists' motivations and experiences with volunteer work (Michel 2007), and focusing on voluntourism within a domestic setting of my home country (Holmes et al. 2009).

## CHAPTER I

### Weathering the Storm

When Hurricane Katrina hit the city of New Orleans on August 29, 2005, the storm wreaked havoc not only within the city, but along the Gulf Coast stretching from Texas to Florida (Figure 1).

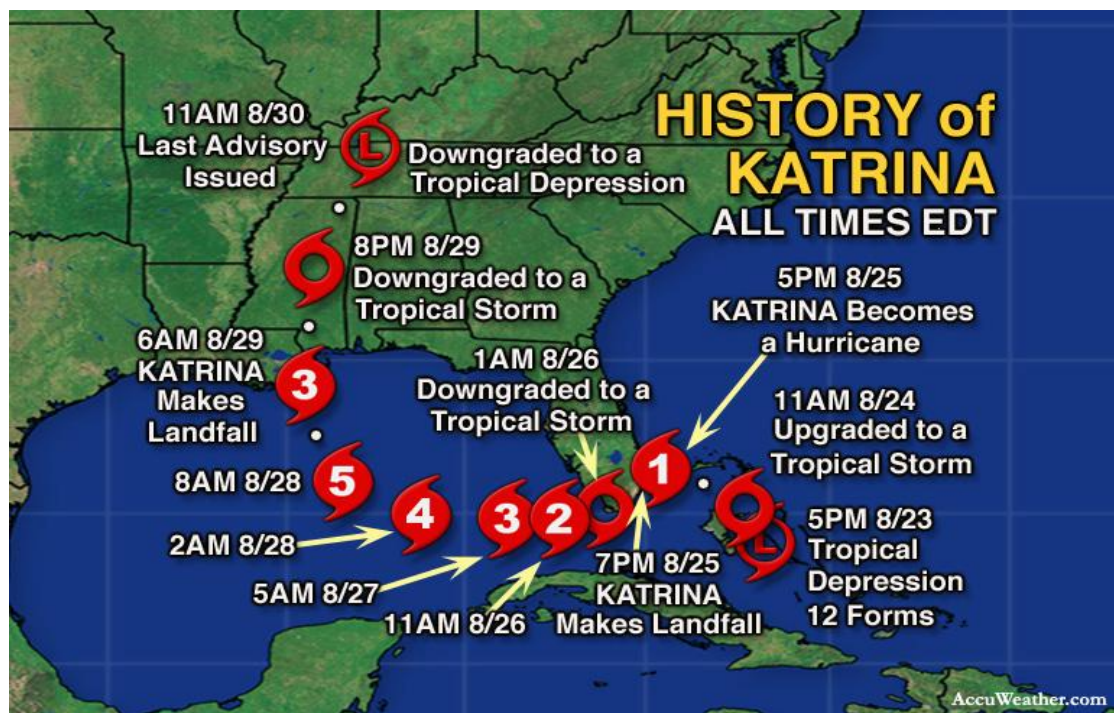


Figure 1—Map: History of Katrina. Source: <http://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-blogs/weathermatrix/anniversary-of-3/4212>

The storm surge flooded the majority of the city of New Orleans once it breached the levees in more than 50 different places (Figure 2), transforming the city into a temporary lake for weeks thereafter (Adams et al. 2009:615).

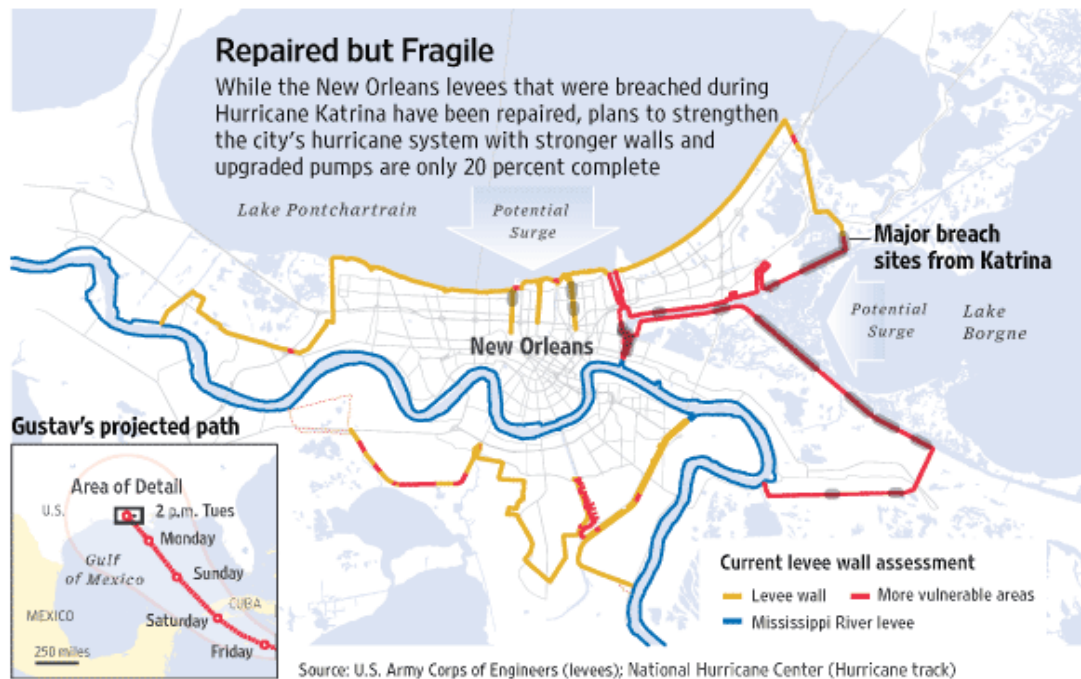


Figure 2—Map: Levee Breaches in New Orleans. Source: <http://blogs.wsj.com/stormtracker/2008/09/01/water-overtops-new-orleans-industrial-canal/>

The Lower Ninth Ward, a primarily African American, working class neighborhood within the city of New Orleans (Figure 3), experienced extreme inundation from Katrina because of its precarious geographic location; Figure 4 illustrates how it is bordered by water on three sides—the Mississippi River to the south, the Industrial Canal to the west, and the Intracoastal Waterway to the north.

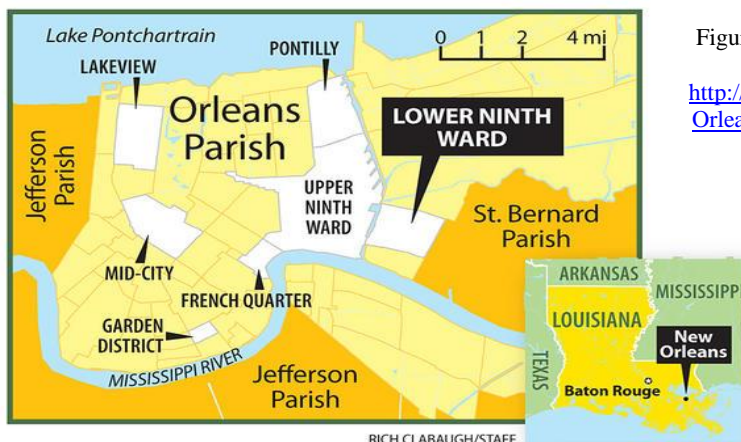


Figure 3—Map: Location of Lower Ninth Ward.  
Source: [http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2012/0224/New-Orleans-raiding-craze-aims-to-clear-way-for-post-Katrina-recovery/\(page\)/2](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2012/0224/New-Orleans-raiding-craze-aims-to-clear-way-for-post-Katrina-recovery/(page)/2)

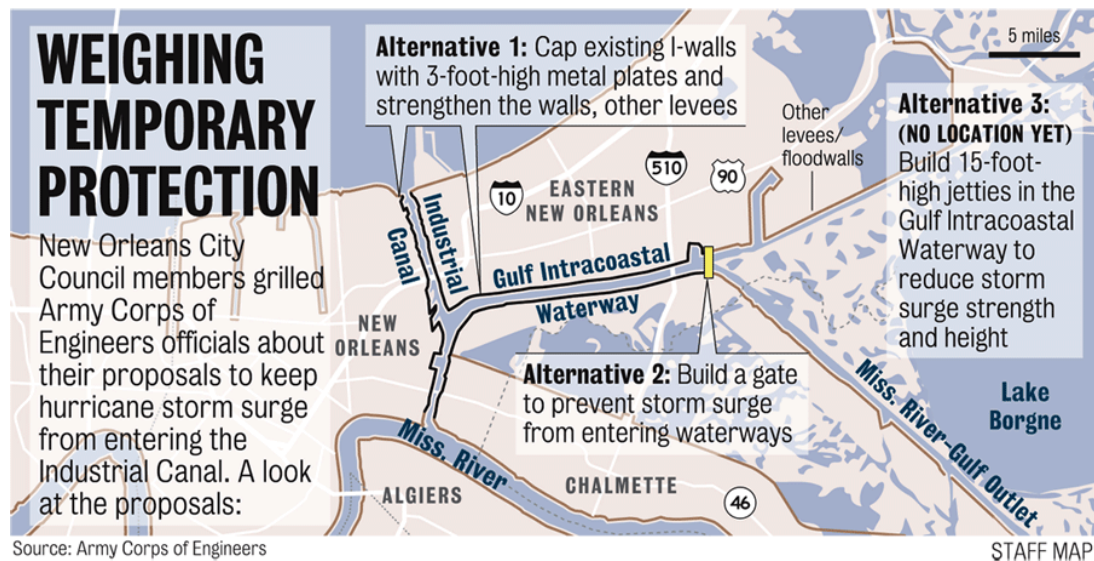


Figure 4—Map: Important Bodies of Water Surrounding the Lower Ninth. Source: [http://blog.nola.com/timespicayune/2007/08/interim\\_storm\\_protection\\_along.html](http://blog.nola.com/timespicayune/2007/08/interim_storm_protection_along.html)

The storm pushed gulf water into the Waterway, causing the water levels to rise drastically in the Industrial Canal. Consequently, the surge tore down floodwalls, which allowed a relentless gushing of water to spread throughout the Lower Ninth Ward via the collapsed levee of North Claiborne Avenue. (Figure 5 exhibits water spilling over a highlighted floodwall into the Upper Ninth Ward; the floodwall mirroring the one depicted in the picture—the levee of North Claiborne Avenue—is the one that I am referring to.)





Figure 5—Map: Levee Breach in the Lower Ninth Ward. Source: [http://www.nola.com/hurricane/index.ssf/2008/09/report\\_water\\_coming\\_over\\_indus.html](http://www.nola.com/hurricane/index.ssf/2008/09/report_water_coming_over_indus.html)

Water continued pouring into the Lower Ninth Ward for several weeks, reaching levels as deep as twelve feet in some areas of the neighborhood (Thompson et al. 2012:12). The initial impact of Katrina hit the Lower Ninth Ward swift and hard. Consequently, the prolonged impact wrought by an unapologetic hurricane on this working-class neighborhood would prove to be a slow and messy process toward recovery. The post-Katrina Lower Ninth Ward reeked of failed disaster response and relief by governmental agencies and prolonged displacement of residents from their homes, communities, and the city of New Orleans (Wright 2011; Jackson 2011; Dawdy 2008; Adams et al. 2009; Breunlin & Regis 2006; Colten 2006; Surviving Katrina 2006).

## CHAPTER II

### The Lower Ninth Ward of Yesterday and Today

The topic of disasters in anthropology generally involves focusing on a particular disaster and studying the ways that it uncovers the relations between a community and its environment, between culture and nature. However, the common analysis of disasters tends to look at the “bigger” pictures of the magnitude of the disaster and the public policy reactions to fixing what happened. What is lacking in these disaster analyses are micro processes of how individuals recover on a daily basis as well as attempts to understand the pre-catastrophe societal issues and tensions that surely contribute to and guide disastrous outcomes (Dawdy 2006:720). By identifying the vulnerabilities that existed in the Lower Ninth Ward and the city of New Orleans *before* the Hurricane, one should have a clearer picture of how to approach rebuilding efforts with these issues in mind.

As Colten (2006:731) suggests, vulnerability to disastrous events is shaped by physical conditions (like areas below sea level, levees, drainage systems) as well as social and political factors (like poverty, racial segregation, urban renewal). Dawdy (2006:724) describes vulnerability as “a delicate imbalance” because “it empowers the observer to retrospectively predict disaster.” The history of the Lower Ninth Ward posits it as a *vulnerable* place within the city of New Orleans due to a combination of unfortunate geographical dispositions and divisive social trends that still continue today. (The image of a vulnerable New Orleans still permeates people’s perceptions of New Orleans, especially voluntourists’ descriptions of the city, which I will discuss in detail later on.)

New Orleans, LA, was founded in 1718. Outside the French Quarter, lands along the Mississippi were surveyed into plantations because of their soil fertility and accessibility to the river. The area that is now known as the Lower Ninth Ward used to be part of these plantation lands (Thompson et al. 2012:9). Because of the Lower Ninth Ward's location, it was originally standing at or above sea level. The spring floods of the Mississippi River would naturally replenish flooded lands with new soil before concerted efforts were made to keep the river water from inundating the land (Thompson et al. 2012:9). Once residents established permanent living patterns in early New Orleans, wealthy inhabitants, along with free blacks and enslaved blacks living in close proximity to their owners, tended to occupy areas of higher elevation, pushing impoverished residents to live in cheaper, lower lying areas. These elevated areas were typically the banks along the Mississippi River's natural levee. Eventually, when slavery ended, emancipated slaves (along with migrants and Southern and Eastern European immigrants) set up homes in "back-a-town" areas, which were situated between back swamps and the natural levee (Breunlin and Regis 2006:749). The Lower Ninth Ward was one of the neighborhoods constructed on this lower-lying land that has always been susceptible to flooding. It is crucial to show how the Lower Ninth Ward has been physically and socially subjected to this unfortunate location to better understand the language of vulnerability that surrounds discussions about the neighborhood and similar areas: "Since the beginning of the city's history, poor and working class black New Orleanians have been forced to live in ecologically and economically marginal land" (Breunlin and Regis 2006:746).

When the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers began the construction of levee and drainage systems in 1862, these barriers pushed water away from higher elevations, where socially privileged neighborhoods usually stood, toward the city's poorer districts; they "fundamentally altered the geography of vulnerability" (Colten 2006:732). In 1918, local governments began the construction of the Industrial Canal to connect Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River. Although this five-mile-long and 600-foot-wide canal allowed travel and trade to be more accessible within the city, it was built along the western edge of the Lower Ninth Ward, physically cutting the neighborhood off from the rest of New Orleans. In 1940, a second navigation canal called the Intracoastal Waterway was placed to the north of the Lower Ninth Ward. The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, which has been described as a "hurricane superhighway," linked the Industrial Canal and the Intracoastal Waterway in the 1960s (Breunlin and Regis 2006:749). Now that the Lower Ninth was surrounded by water on three sides—Industrial Canal, Intracoastal Waterway, Mississippi River—soils began to subside with the implementation of a municipal drainage system (Thompson et al. 2012:10). With all of these engineering efforts placed around the Lower Ninth Ward, it set up a potentially dangerous landscape that could seriously harm the citizens of a neighborhood that already faced poor treatment in other ways.

These drainage systems were valuable for transforming wetlands into suburban tracts along the edge of Lake Pontchartrain in the early Twentieth Century. However, deed restrictions regularly prohibited blacks from owning land in these suburban neighborhoods (until the US Supreme Court outlawed these discriminatory practices in the 1950s). Commonly referred to as "redlining", this de jure segregation of white

communities from black communities led to predominantly black neighborhoods being more susceptible to storm surges because of their relatively lower elevation and closer proximity to human-made canals. For example, the impact of Hurricane Betsy (1965) on the Lower Ninth Ward resulted in destructive flooding and minimal outside assistance (Colten 2006; Jackson 2011; Breunlin and Regis 2006), leaving many residents hopeless and disillusioned with government response; Katrina created a similar situation.

The next divisive social trend in New Orleans mirrored what was happening in urban centers all over America: white flight after World-War II. Many white residents living within New Orleans chose to leave Orleans Parish and move to Jefferson Parish for the suburbs. As a result, the demographics of the city dramatically shifted—70% white in 1900 to 70% black in 2000 (Colten 2006:732). The Lower Ninth Ward endured the brunt of this shift. By 2000, the Census indicated that it was 95% African American. Today, when predominantly white volunteer groups enter the Lower Ninth, it is strikingly obvious that these groups are not local to the area.

Since the 1950s, redevelopment and urban renewal plans have existed to improve land value and address issues of structural racism and class division caused by demographic shifts like white flight. However, even with the best intentions in mind to “deconcentrate poverty” inside cities, these plans produced unintended effects. One major goal of urban renewal was to demolish housing projects and replace them with interstates, parks, or whatever else was considered more “valuable” for that tract of land. New Orleans began destruction of its housing developments in the 1990s under the Clinton-era program Hope VI, which was intended to rehabilitate existing projects or demolish distressed units in order to build mixed-income developments (Wright 2011:5). One of

the demolished developments, the Desire Public Housing Development located in the Ninth Ward, previously existed as a center for the rise of black culture in the Lower Ninth Ward. Even if it was considered a poverty magnet by outsiders, former residents held strong attachments to their homes in this development through collective and individual memories of growing up there (Breunlin and Regis 2006:746). Overall, urban renewal created a vast displacement of working-class African Americans from their affordable homes—a wrenching experience which would remain in the psyche of many once Katrina generated new housing issues.

These social issues—redlining, white flight, urban renewal—expose the ways in which race and socioeconomic class play an equal part in predicting the potential vulnerability of communities to disasters, just as much as physical landscape does. The post-Katrina dialogues of how to approach rebuilding and where to start should have never lost sight of these historical factors that continue to shape the physical and social landscape of the Lower Ninth Ward and the city. Yet, government and media response to Hurricane Katrina rarely envisioned the connection between the pre-Katrina city and its post-disaster condition. Today, community-focused organizations are continuing to try to address recovery concerns in the Lower Ninth Ward, and it is important to note if and how these groups pay attention to the structural issues (racism, classism, etc.) that have consistently affected the neighborhood. The purpose of this historical preface establishes a foundation for how I constructed and perceived an image of a vulnerable New Orleans neighborhood in my ethnographic portrayals of it. Part of my anthropological journey to the Lower Ninth Ward needed this historical backdrop to help inform me about what made this place a desirable location for voluntourists and voluntourism organizations.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Disaster Capitalism and Displacement**

Immediately following the hurricane, the comparisons of New Orleans to a modern-day Pompeii and a post-disaster wasteland in media reports ignited a public discourse about how to rebuild the city (Gotham 2007:2; Dawdy 2006:721). Numerous voices outside the city suggested that the hardest-hit neighborhoods be bulldozed and replaced with new structures, such as parks or wildlife reservations (Dawdy 2006:723). Of course, these suggestions were met with angered responses from citizens who lived in such areas. Many business-minded opportunists envisioned the city after Hurricane Katrina to be a blank slate for outside interests to develop and rebuild the land, the school system, and the city's cultural sector (music, cuisine, architecture). A recovery plan like this attracted "more affluent community members at the expense of the primarily black, poor, and working-class sector of New Orleans" (Jackson 2011:5). It also ignored the deeply entrenched political, economic, and social inequalities that exist in New Orleans. People that were displaced from their homes and communities after the hurricane had already suffered enough—the possibility of being displaced even further from home loomed as a very real threat.

Planning commissions like the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) commission led by Mayor Nagin formulated rebuilding strategies that would basically require neighborhoods to "prove" their worth—based on measures like historical significance, home ownership, topography, self-sufficiency, viability—to

be considered for reconstruction (Gotham 2007:199). Locals openly criticized these exclusionary recovery strategies (Adams et al. 2009:624). Other options for recovery were proposed in response to the Mayor's "BNOB commission":

One such group was the "From the Lake to the River: The New Orleans Coalition for Legal Aid and Disaster Relief" organization. The significance of the "From the Lake to the River" group's report, described as a "... collaborative report of a variety of legal academics, community activists, non-profit organizations, practitioners, and students," is that they proposed what they described as alternative approaches and solutions for recovery with a focus on an *informed community* (From the Lake to the River Foundation 2005:2). They emphasized creating social institutions that benefit all New Orleans residents over plans aimed at meeting objectives solely dictated by the demands of tourism. (Jackson 2011:5)

Naomi Klein (2007) claims that post-Katrina New Orleans possessed the perfect conditions for "shock" due to the city's complete collapse of infrastructure and social services. She believes that this dire situation enabled the government to rearrange its priorities because of the idea that the city was now in a fresh position to move in different directions than it had before the storm. The federal government began contracting with private, for-profit corporations to control the services that it, the government, originally supplied. For example, the company Bechtel won the contract to supply and install trailers for FEMA, while another company called Blackwater Security was hired to patrol the city and provide armed guards for FEMA trailer projects. In effect, the contracted companies worked to increase the strength of the private sector while largely ignoring the duties of the public sector, such as providing social welfare, city infrastructure, public housing, etc. Many began to lose faith in federal, state, and local government response due to the focus on Klein's concept of "disaster capitalism": "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (Klein 2007:6). To reiterate, disaster capitalism occurs



when disastrous events create a state of crisis. The government exploits this chaos to focus on contracting with private corporations so that they can carry out services (with a motive to profit) that were once duties of the public sector. Essentially, it becomes a “state-within-a-state.” While the government failed to address the concerns of its most vulnerable communities, such as residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, it reproduced an ongoing displacement of these populations. It also produced public discourses about the need to counteract these governmental failures. As BondGraham eloquently states:

The post-Katrina situation has been seized through this strategy in a way that has proven far more favorable to local elites and far more destructive to working class communities. New economies and privatized governing structures are taking shape along with experimentally new formations of housing, education, transportation, and more. (2011:286).

Residents of the Lower Ninth Ward suffered some of the most prolonged displacement: it was the last neighborhood to be opened after the hurricane and the last to receive demolition permits (Dawdy 2008:722). In the context of pre-Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward had a population of 13,990, according to the 2000 Census; by 2010, the population had dipped to 2,389 (Thompson et al. 2012:5). Even though the hurricane did fairly equal damage to black and white, wealthy and poor neighborhoods, the recovery rate of poor and working class black neighborhoods has been much slower. The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC) estimated that the predominantly white, upper-middle-class neighborhood of Lakeview was around 40.6 percent recovered in 2008; the GNOCDC then found that the predominantly black, working-class neighborhood of the Lower Ninth Ward consisted of only 11 percent of its pre-Katrina population in 2008 (Adams et al. 2009:620). Also, “in May of 2008, black storm victims were more than twice as likely than white storm victims to be still living in

[FEMA] trailers” (Wright 2011:5). There have been lawsuits against the Army Corps of Engineers for their criminal neglect of the levees in New Orleans—which put vulnerable neighborhoods at a greater risk of flooding than more affluent neighborhoods. Before Katrina hit, there were around 11,000 occupied housing units, 9,000 of which were government-voucher supported. After Katrina hit, approximately 4,000 units were left, leaving around 80 percent of occupants without anywhere to live (Adams et al. 2009:627). “By not opening public housing and failing to provide basic services such as health care and public education, many displaced residents and their advocates believe that local, state, and federal governments are violating their basic human rights” (Breunlin and Regis 2006:745). The consistent displacement of marginalized populations in New Orleans resulted from pre- and post-Katrina political policies that inevitably pushed the city’s poor minorities into its least desirable terrain or outside the city altogether. This enduring frustration of being overlooked and undermined planted the seed for people to do something about it.

Because of the perceived distance that stood between all levels of government and the people of New Orleans, many survivors and outsiders to the city decided to proactively recover after Katrina—individual volunteers, church organizations, non-profit organizations, and grassroots relief groups worked on addressing the surrounding issues (Ilel 2006; Klein 2007). Many residents of these overlooked neighborhoods:

...read the figures suggesting that an enormous supply of federal funding is available to help rebuild New Orleans (statistics are varied: \$17 billion, \$11.5 billion, \$109 billion), and they look at their neighborhoods, which are nowhere near recovered. They know that the only visible signs of recovery are the results of the work of volunteer groups: kids from churches all over the country, nonprofit volunteer groups from other states, Habitat for Humanity, Brad Pitt’s Make It Right Foundation, Common Ground (which offers nonprofit community-

based health clinics, house gutting, and a variety of other services), and Save the Children (Adams et al 2009:624).

It is in the above statement, “they know that the only visible signs of recovery are the results of the work of volunteer groups,” that becomes problematic. Of course these groups are working hard to fight for social justice in the face of governmental negligence. However, it must be noted that this feeds into a narrative of constructing these disadvantaged neighborhoods as helpless and dependent on the “goodwill” of outside assistance. It does not include them in the fight to rebuild their communities; instead, it suggests that most of the recovery that has happened is due to the volunteer work provided by these groups. It should be “the residents of the city who find ways to reconnect, to cross boundaries, and to build new ways of interacting with meaningful places in their lives—even if they have been dramatically transformed” (Breunlin and Regis 2006:745). Unfortunately, communities that lack the proper social, political, economic, and physical capital to rebuild often get consumed into narratives that showcase them as not being able to recover by themselves, which likely feeds into a cycle of keeping a steady supply of volunteers around at all times to “fix” whatever issues these communities face.

## CHAPTER IV

### Voluntourism

On the official tourism website for New Orleans, there is a page solely dedicated to promoting “voluntourism” (New Orleans Online 2014). The page has a layout similar to travel booking websites, like Expedia. Near the top are tabs labeled “Things to Do,” “Where to Eat,” “Where to Stay,” “Plan Your Trip,” and an option to “Book a New Orleans Trip Today!” The cover picture on the page shows a group of around 30-40 smiling adults huddled together for a photo op. Everyone is smiling and wearing matching purple t-shirts while holding shovels or other gardening tools. If you scroll down, the main section entitled “A Good Time Doing Good” sells the idea of voluntourism by making the reader feel needed, capable, and compassionate: “..people are discovering the excitement and satisfaction of using time off to serve others. You too can share this wealth! ***Be a New Orleans voluntourist!***”

Voluntourism, or volunteer tourism, is a form of popular alternative tourism in which people pay to travel and conduct voluntary work to mutually benefit their personal growth as well as the place where they participate (Raymond and Hall 2008; Conran 2011; Sin 2009). While most of the literature available on voluntourism examines volunteer tourist experiences that occur outside one’s own country, there are voluntourism opportunities to experience inside one’s home country. As Holmes suggests, the concept of volunteer tourism is still debatable; most research focuses on international travel destinations, leaving out many opportunities to examine domestic voluntourism (Holmes et al. 2009:256). I will be adding to the diversity of destination

settings for volunteer tourists by analyzing my own “volunteer tour” within my home country; I travelled to the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans.

The interest in voluntourism as a topic for study has only been recently been introduced. Thus, the body of empirical research on voluntourism is limited (Woosnam and Jung Lee 2011:310). So far, ideas about social distance, cross-cultural understanding, intimacy, neocolonialism, social inequality, privileged responsibility, destination-based volunteering, and positive social change have all been addressed in the literature on voluntourism (Conran 2011; McGeehee and Santos 2005; Raymond and Hall 2008; Sin 2009; Sin 2010; Woosnam and Jung Lee 2011; Holmes et al. 2010). Woosnam and Jung Lee (2011) make use of the Bogardus social distance scale to propose a method for measuring the willingness of individuals in volunteer groups and host communities to participate in social interactions with each other. They argue that by measuring the social distance between voluntourists and residents, the scale should indicate how accepting individuals are of people from other cultures and if there is room for improving cross-cultural tolerance and understanding (Woosnam and Jung Lee 2011:311). The findings of Raymond and Hall (2008) indicate that a social distance scale or similar measurement would be valuable to assessing the climate of cross-cultural relations between volunteers and hosts. They discovered that although voluntourism programs intended to be mutually beneficial for both the volunteer and the host community, voluntourists tended to reinforce power inequalities between themselves—coming from developed countries—and the resident hosts—living in developing countries (Raymond and Hall 2008:531). In comparison to their findings, Conran (2011) suggests that intimacy emerges between voluntourists and members of the host community as a memorable aspect of the

experience; yet, the focus on intimate interactions between these groups overshadows a larger critique of the structural inequality faced by residents. She notes that voluntourism's implicit goal is for the privileged savior (the voluntourist) to pick and choose who and what is worth saving (Conran 2011:1464). This creates a binary of 'us' and 'them,' which is packaged and sold as the "helping narrative" in voluntourism marketing strategies. Sin critically engages with this inherent issue in voluntourism that the privileged are expected to be responsible for the less-privileged:

The notion of "responsibility"... is often shaped and constructed around the view that the privileged "developed world" should be responsible to the less-privileged "developing world"... the developing world is often portrayed as a "distant other" that one ought to care or be responsible for, even though most at the consumer-end will possibly never personally encounter those that they are supposedly socially responsible for. In tourism however, unlike many other (especially product-oriented) industries, the two "worlds" (if they are indeed separate) are brought together into a shared space as tourists act out "care" and "responsibilities" in their travel destinations. This means that as an end-consumer, tourists actually do personally see and engage the "other" that he or she had committed responsibility to when he or she opted to take tours or holidays that are supposedly socially responsible (2010:984).

As I mentioned before, the majority of this research focuses on voluntourists picking international destinations as their choice for where to conduct their volunteer work. Most of these destinations are considered to be inside developing countries that attract people from more privileged, Western areas to swoop in and "help." The motivation to travel and reach outside the bounds of one's own community is an important component of tourism itself. "All tourists desire this deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree; it is a basic component of their motivation to travel" (MacCannell 1976:10). Combining passive leisurely travel with active volunteer work creates a new approach to seeing the world, making sense of it, and influencing the relations between people and places in the process.

However, there needs to be a broader focus on what constitutes voluntourism and how there can be a variety of different versions of this experience.

The paucity of research on domestic volunteer tourism (e.g., Halpenny and Caissie, 2003), volunteers traveling between developed countries (e.g., Lyons, 2003), and between or from developing nations (Sherraden, Lough, and Moore McBride, 2008) underplays the diversity of destination settings where volunteer tourism can be undertaken (Holmes et al. 2009:258).

Voluntourism opportunities abound within a domestic setting [inside one's own country]; the research in this thesis adds to the body of existing literature on voluntourism and expands it by looking at these opportunities for domestic voluntourism.

When disasters strike and the need for human help to rebuild a place is urgent and necessary, voluntourists could be vital to relief efforts. Once that urgency subsides, I am interested in why people continue to dedicate voluntary work toward continued recovery. Part of this could be said to stem from a person's desire to "help," which can be particularly influenced by a personal sense of community, social ties, and regional cultures—all important aspects of community connectedness (Clerkin et al. 2013:98). There are a variety of other factors that persuade people to voluntarily help, such as enhancing their CV, meeting new people, travelling, earning school credit, and so forth. Overall, I want to examine why people feel so motivated to "do good" and what kinds of implications—both good and bad—this has for the community, place, and organization in which help is given.

## CHAPTER V

### Methods

I first became engaged with the idea of voluntourism when I read about it in Kevin Fox Gotham's book, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (2007). I knew that I wanted to examine the recovery of New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina in my thesis, but I was not sure how to contextualize this aim. Eventually, I realized that I could take advantage of my role as an outsider to the City of New Orleans to try to understand recovery from a non-local perspective. Voluntourism appeared to be the perfect opportunity for establishing this goal because it would allow me to stay in New Orleans for a fair amount of time to collect data, and it would expose me to a form of recovery carried out by other outsiders like myself.

I began by searching for 'voluntourism opportunities in New Orleans' online. A website created by the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation included a page for voluntourism opportunities in the city (New Orleans Online 2014). I scrolled through the list of options and chose to apply to volunteer for a week at Common Ground Relief (Common Ground Relief 2013), a grassroots, non-profit organization based in the Lower Ninth Ward. This particular organization caught my attention because of the variety of recovery efforts it offered—gutting homes, running a health clinic, wetlands restoration, legal services, etc. After filling out the application, I received an email two days later that stated they would be looking forward to seeing me.

Next, I needed to create a research project that would involve my anthropological and sociological background. I followed the process required by the Internal Review



Board at the University of Mississippi to receive approval to conduct original research with human subjects (Appendices A and B contain the IRB approved consent form and questionnaire that I used to interact with human subjects in my study); through this process, I decided to frame my research question around the motivations of voluntourists for volunteering abroad, especially in a context where the urgency to volunteer has subsided. To answer this question, I engaged in qualitative research by recording field notes and assuming the role of a participant observer during my voluntourism experience; also, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with other voluntourists while living at Common Ground and emailed six questionnaires/surveys to voluntourists I had met after the trip had ended (four of the six surveys were returned). The data that I collected from these findings prepared me to create an ethnographic portrayal of my voluntourism experience.

Participant observation and field notes as well as interviews and surveys equipped me with sufficient material to explore the aims of my research question. Participant observation allowed me to be both a voluntourist (a participant) and an investigator (an observer) at the same time; this approach for studying humans and their practices is commonly used by anthropologists to get a “hands-on” sense of what is going on in a particular context. Essentially, it granted me a unique, dualistic perspective to study the behavior of others and the daily operations of the organization while also reflexively understanding my role within these situations. Field notes were useful for scribbling down random thoughts that I had while doing volunteer work or exploring New Orleans. I also tried to reflect on the day’s events before I went to sleep each night by summarizing my thoughts and questions.

The audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews that I conducted were useful for getting people to discuss their personal motivations for coming to New Orleans to volunteer. Asking people if they wanted to be interviewed made me nervous at first. I had never conducted an interview prior to coming to Common Ground, so I was hesitant to ask people if they would like to contribute to my research. Of course, I had nothing to fear—most people wanted to be interviewed. The relaxed one-on-one setting and the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewees to offer original insights and themes that my questions did not necessarily explore. I tried to make the interviews have a common purpose—to talk about why one wanted to volunteer in New Orleans—while also maintaining a conversational tone. The drawbacks of this interview structure were mainly that some interviewees seemed to feel like they needed to hear the next question to continue talking. This could have been a fault of mine for not adequately emphasizing that the direction of the interview did not have to follow a strict Q & A format. I transcribed all four interviews and coded them to discover common themes in the transcriptions.

Finally, the surveys that I distributed after I had already departed from Common Ground were primarily meant as a substitution for interviews. If time were not an issue, I would have only conducted one-on-one interviews. However, our daily schedules were sporadically planned, so I was never really certain when I could set aside enough time to interview people. The surveys gave voluntourists the chance to reflect on their experiences and write out their answers. As a result, the surveys were much less candid than the interviews in regards to how people described their motivations.

Overall, each of these methods for data collection involved limitations, but I felt that they were generally beneficial to exploring my research question about individual motivations for volunteering in a post-crisis location—aka post-Katrina New Orleans. Nevertheless, as a self-reflexive investigator, I like to keep in mind that my research raises certain questions while failing to look at others. The ethnographic picture that I produce with this thesis will only be a snapshot of my particular experience with voluntourism. In the words of Renato Rosaldo:

All interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others. Even when knowledgeable, sensitive, fluent in the language, and able to move easily in an alien cultural world, good ethnographers still have their limits, and their analyses always are incomplete. (1989:529)

In particular, autoethnography is practiced by researchers who use their methodological and research literature tools to make personal analyses while also considering the viewpoints of others; in this vein, the researcher demonstrates the cultural experiences being described and tries to make it familiar to insiders and outsiders (Ellis et al. 2011). I specifically utilize autoethnography to showcase my personal experiences and hypocrisies with voluntourism and relate it to the experiences of other voluntourists I surveyed, interviewed, and observed.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **First Impressions at Common Ground Relief**

Arriving to Common Ground was an anxious experience. I had packed the night before to drive down to New Orleans the next day, not knowing who I would be living amongst, what my living conditions would even be, or how I would approach people to ask to interview them. Thankfully my boyfriend decided to accompany me, after many confrontations about persuading him to come; every time he would have doubts about doing it, I would remind him that he would be getting credit for volunteer work to spruce up his resume—a selfish reason, but a convincing tactic.

We departed Jackson, MS hoping for the best and preparing for the worst. I had read a few news stories on Google about how one of the original co-founders of Common Ground, a Houston native that was an anarchist activist turned FBI informant, had infiltrated the plans of two men who were planning to throw Molotov cocktails on law enforcement cars at the 2008 Republican National Convention (Hanners 2009). He was no longer working for Common Ground when we stayed, but his and other founding members' anarchist philosophies (of approaching community rebuilding through self-governed, grassroots organizing because of the perceived ineptitude of the state/government) still lingered around many aspects of Common Ground. For example, the sign in front of the Common Ground house displayed a raised fist (Figure 6), a common anarchist symbol.



Figure 6—Front of Common Ground House. Source: Mary Elizabeth Smithson.

I was mainly unsure about what we would be doing at Common Ground Relief (Political activism? Protests? Civil disobedience?) when I read about its founding anarchist ideologies. Eventually, I discovered that our work consisted less of “sticking it to the man” and more of building plant beds, picking up trash, and helping an older resident demolish his shed.

It is interesting to point out that all of the people involved in organizing Common Ground came from out of town; the operations director was originally from Miami, our volunteer supervisor was from New York, and the activist-turned-FBI-informant that I discussed above was from Houston. Their mobility allowed them to come to New Orleans, which contrasted with the lack of mobility of current residents who maybe wanted to leave or residents who were barely able to evacuate but have not had the chance to return. Is the desire to help New Orleans recover a privileged goal of the ones

with expendable cash to get a plane ticket or drive to the city? Is the influx of outsiders who want to have a stake in the future of New Orleans displacing the residents who were lost and forgotten during the storm? As another outsider to the city, I was also contributing to this pattern when I became a voluntourist for a week in the Lower Ninth Ward.

On our way there, we were embodying the role of such outsiders who enjoyed the thrill of being in the “Big Easy;” this time, though, involved a different take on New Orleans, and we assumed it was not going to be as “thrilling” as our past excursions that involved drinking on Bourbon Street, watching live music on Frenchman Street, or eating beignets at Café du Monde. However, this turned out not to be the case, because our work days were fairly short, and we were able to do as we pleased every night.

The current operations director called me as we were driving down to Common Ground to make sure we were on our way. He sounded friendly enough, so I reassured my passenger and myself that the next week would be a positive learning experience. We finally arrived at the scene of the Lower Ninth Ward after traversing the confusing interstate system that formed a web around New Orleans. The Lower Ninth presented an array of multi-colored, shotgun-style houses in varying degrees of physical deterioration and renovation. One house may have been marked with spray-painted x’s—an indicator of water level height during the Katrina floods—and boarded up with blank pieces of plywood. Another house may have been recently re-painted and ornamented with a freshly landscaped yard as people calmly reclined on the front porch. The contrast of recovery jumped to our attention as we maneuvered the neighborhood’s one-way streets that were punctuated by potholes and uneven asphalt.

Eventually, we entered the area where Common Ground was nested. Streets were smoothly paved, evenly laid sidewalks lined the street's edges, and the surrounding angular houses looked like futuristic, beachfront condominiums (Figure 7); I almost felt like we had entered a completely different city because the aesthetics did not “fit” with the architectural style of the Lower Ninth Ward or even the rest of New Orleans.



Figure 7—Make It Right Homes. Source: Mary Elizabeth Smithson.

We found out that these houses, around one hundred of them, were the creations of Brad Pitt’s Make It Right foundation. They were made with glass-infused, chemical-free wood and a few included solar panels, among other “green” features, to make them sustainable and environmentally friendly. However, the wood did not fare well in the sub-tropical climate of New Orleans and ended up rotting just a few years after being constructed (Lofgren 2014). Although well-intentioned, the innovative redevelopment strategy of an outsider to the city seemed to be an artistic experiment gone wrong. Common Ground Relief, in the midst of Make It Right’s quirky housing, was located in an old shotgun-style, two story blue house near the Industrial Canal that bordered the western edge of the Lower Ninth Ward. As I mentioned before, a sign with the image of an anarchist-inspired fist holding a hammer on one side and a medical cross on the other hung under the front window of the house. On the left side of the house, the raised fist

appeared again. The image reminded me of the organization's slogan "Solidarity Not Charity," which implies that the mission of this volunteer-run, non-profit organization is to ally with people in suffering communities and not to just put a band-aid on pre-existing issues.

We parked on the street right next to the blue house, and were greeted by the director who had been calling me. He appeared through a door that led to the backyard of the house. A short, plump man dressed in weathered sneakers, a dingy t-shirt, and cargo shorts shook our hands and showed us inside. His appearance signified an unidentifiable age—he was either nearing middle age or much less younger than middle age due to signs of fatigue and stress that probably accompanied the over-worked, under-paid lifestyle of running a non-profit organization. He asked us if it was our first time to New Orleans in a way that suggested the majority of visitors to Common Ground were out-of-towners, or tourists. We replied with a hearty "no" and proceeded to tell him that we venture down to New Orleans quite a bit. He seemed slightly surprised to hear that a couple of Mississippians wanted to stay there and join the Common Ground cause.

Our home for the next week would be on the bottom floor of the main Common Ground house; there was also a neighboring, newer pink house that Common Ground owned to accommodate a maximum of forty to sixty volunteers at a time. Bunk beds filled every room in the pink house, which reminded me of summer camp living conditions. Thankfully, we had our own room in the blue house. It was a unique space. The walls were covered in chipped paint. Our mattresses had obviously been used and slept on: stains covered the exterior of the mattresses, some had slight tears on them exposing the soft material underneath. "Thank goodness I brought clean sheets," I kept



reminding myself. Scribbles of past volunteers appeared on every imaginable surface such as the walls, the ceiling, the wooden frames of our bunk beds, and the rickety bookshelf that held multi-colored quilted blankets. The main light source in our room could only be turned on via a strange rigged system: by pulling a plastic bottle full of water that hung on the end of a string, which connected to the light somewhere above the ceiling boards. Outside of our room was a make-shift sitting area; with its futon and mini fridge, it looked like it belonged in the basement of a college student's first house. New Orleans memorabilia, such as bags of Voodoo-flavored Zapp's potato chips, a map of the Lower Ninth Ward, a street sign for some New Orleans road, and a magnet of a Saints helmet, decorated various surfaces in the sitting area. Upstairs in the blue house consisted of a large kitchen where voluntourists would rotate cooking and cleaning duties. Across from the kitchen was the dining room. We would eat, hang out, or read here when we were not working. Overall, the communal living conditions of Common Ground forced me to talk to other voluntourists and helped me facilitate relationships with these people so I could get a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a voluntourist: why were we here? What were we doing? How were we helping?

## CHAPTER VII

### The Common Ground Experience

I settled in to my squeaky bunk the first night I arrived at Common Ground with a drafty window pushing twenty degree winds through the cracks behind my head. A space heater sat in the middle of my room but hardly provided any heat. It was strange to be in one of the warmest places in the United States worrying about how I would stay warm for the night. “Oh well,” I told myself, “I’m used to this. Weather in the South is unpredictable.” Hurricane Katrina came to mind when I said this, and I found it oddly comforting to understand something so chaotic as weather in the South—I felt that I had an intimate knowledge of the region growing up as a native of Mississippi and I recall experiencing the same hurricane that tore through the city in which I was staying. I thought that my position as someone who was familiar with the region of the South and the city of New Orleans would somehow be more capable of understanding the issues that surrounded the Lower Ninth Ward. Little did I know that all of my personal ego-boosting was unnecessary. I discovered that I shared more in common with voluntourists (white skin, young adult age, college student status) who came from different regions of the United States than I did with the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward (predominantly black, variety of ages, working class and poor).

With my pen and notebook settled on my lap that cold night, I tried to discern how I would write up my thoughts, observations, and analyses for every day. Too tired from the car ride to plan that far ahead, I jotted down a few notes about my first impressions before falling asleep..

That first morning as a voluntourist, I tried to dress appropriately for the weather and the work we would be doing. I put on my puffy L.L. Bean jacket and my waterproof rain boots with layers of shirts, pants, and socks to buffer the freezing winds that were supposed to hit us that day. Walking up stairs from my basement dwelling, I met four fellow voluntourists who were from New Jersey. They were cooking breakfast, and I noticed that their Jersey accents sounded funny and foreign whenever I talked to them. I learned that their larger group, a cohort of students from a small New Jersey college, represented the Alternative Break Club at their school. This student-run, student-funded club allowed them the chance to do volunteer work and service projects during traditional break times, such as winter or spring break. Some of the students from New Jersey had been to New Orleans multiple times during their college careers to assist in Katrina recovery efforts while others were seeing the South and the city for their first time ever.

Once we all filled our bellies and cleaned the kitchen in preparation for lunch, we got into our cars and drove outside of the Lower Ninth Ward to the Audobon Nature Institute, a park that had been abandoned and closed after Katrina. We met up with our volunteer supervisor, a young, white man from New York who had come to volunteer at Common Ground three years ago. He ended up staying and working for the nonprofit after his volunteer experience; he lived in a small room on the same basement floor where I slept. He introduced us to a middle-aged, white woman who worked for the park. A former lion tamer, she was originally from San Diego, California. As a biologist, she told us about how she worked hard to reopen the park at the expense of potentially losing her job. To me, this sounded like a strong dedication to doing what needed to be done in the face of gridlocked, intersecting interests. We were eventually directed to pick up trash

in the area, which was sometimes hard to find because of the dense plant life that had grown prolifically in many places. After spending about four hours scavenging for trash and listening to our guide's reasons for wanting to make the park an accessible spot for people to visit, we piled back into our individual cars and returned to Common Ground in the Lower Ninth Ward to eat lunch. The remainder of the day consisted of napping, showering, and preparing dinner for that night, which was a traditional Monday meal of red beans and rice. Then, we all convened at the pink house to bond and drink.

Few reflective conversations arose about our first day as voluntourists; most of us talked about our personal interests and the differences between the South and the North. There was minimal discussion about our desires for being in New Orleans. I told myself that, surely, later in the week we would get time to talk about our role as voluntourists and our impacts on the communities in which we worked. That night I went to sleep comfortable with my decision spend a week in New Orleans—I was hopeful to see more, hear more, and learn more about a place—the Lower Ninth Ward—that I had only read about in scholarly articles and witnessed on television.

On day two as a voluntourist, I woke up, took a shower in one of the basement bathrooms, and scurried to my room to escape from the cold temperatures that still lingered. I was groggy and tired, wondering what activity we would be doing for the day. After going through the same breakfast routine as day one, we were informed that we would be consolidating materials to build plant beds for marsh grasses that would eventually be relocated to a wetlands area which bordered part of the Lower Ninth. With our crew of about twelve to fifteen white college students, we drove to a concrete parking lot of a former car dealership and loaded wooden posts, black tarps, cement blocks, and a

few potted plants into the back of a pick-up truck. We followed each other in our voluntourist caravan to a property that Common Ground owned a few blocks away from its home base. Here, we unloaded the materials, and our supervisor taught us how to create evenly spaced plant beds. We managed to make solid beds that suited his wishes since he oversaw the wetlands restoration project for Common Ground. For the entire day, we constructed these beds, dumped sand into them, and eventually planted rows of marsh grasses in each bed. I remember feeling sore, sunburned, and tired after my second day as a voluntourist. Despite my exhaustion, I was itching to see how my peers were feeling about their initial experiences with Common Ground.

That night, a group of three college students from California arrived. I bonded with them quickly because of our common interests in school (we were all anthropology majors) and music. Because we had established a friendship that I had yet to experience with the students from New Jersey, we decided to go to a local bar that was frequented by college students from Tulane and Southern Mississippi. Rather than getting a taste of the “local flavor” of New Orleans, I felt like I was seeing more of what I was already accustomed to—predominantly white college students who enjoyed karaoke, late nights, and cheap liquor. Regardless, I was getting to relax after a long day’s work.

I began to gather my thoughts about the voluntourism experience so far—is it simply working during the day and going out at night? Would there be any chances to collectively reflect on the work we were doing and why we were doing it? How would we know that it was making a positive impact on the communities of the Lower Ninth Ward if we were only focused on how good we felt for just, well, working and engaging in unskilled labor? I wanted to probe deeper because the opportunities for having group

conversations with community members and other voluntourists did not happen during my trip. The only times we had discussions about our experiences were during my one-on-one interviews with other voluntourists, which left out the possibility for rich conversations between multiple participants.

The third day we demolished a shed for an older black man and his wife in the Lower Ninth Ward. This project was the first and only one that involved residents of the community. In a sense, I felt much more useful my third day as a voluntourist because we worked alongside a couple that had more intimate ties to the space and in turn used our labor to their advantage. I talked to the man after we had finished the demolition. His thick New Orleans accent hung over his words as he warmly told me that he appreciated our help. He then shifted his tone and admitted that his neighborhood was far from perfect. Crime was rampant. Roads were neglected. Very few people had permanently returned. I could only respond with a nod of assurance that he was right. To us, tearing down the shed created a meaningful experience for our voluntourist group to remember the work as something that *we* did to help people. It made me feel proud to be doing that instead of sitting on my couch at home watching television. It made me feel hopeful that living conditions could get better in the Lower Ninth Ward. But this was one instance of doing a good deed. To him and his wife, we were a group of kindhearted voluntourists, but our assistance was temporary and would not singlehandedly transform deeply entrenched issues that affected the Lower Ninth every day.

That same day I recorded three interviews with voluntourists from New Jersey. All three included the shed demolition example as part of their helping narratives, which suggested that part of their motivation for coming to New Orleans was to help others and

become aware of issues outside their immediate home communities. Physically standing next to the man and his wife as we tore down their shed together captured the sort of feel-good sentiment that accompanies promotions of voluntourism by tourism agencies. Especially after this day, the theme of helping and recycling the narrative of helping became prevalent in my research on voluntourism both in and outside the field.

The fourth day involved planting tree boxes in the wetlands triangle. We would seat two to three people in kayaks and canoes and gently row out to areas where the boxes could be submerged. The square boxes began to fall apart once we started filling them with water and mud to cover the tree saplings. Some people worked on screwing the boxes back together while others sat on the bank idly waiting for work to do. An older local black man appeared behind us as we tried to make the tree-planting project worth the effort. He slowly sipped his beer that was covered by a crumpled paper bag. As our supervisor from New York took a break from teaching us how to use electric screwdrivers, the local man asked him what we were doing. He explained that we were planting trees to build up the wetlands so a natural barrier could grow and possibly protect the Lower Ninth from future floods. The man began telling us that his brother used to fish in this area for a living. He warned us that putting too many trees there could create issues for other people who use the waters to support themselves financially. Our supervisor nodded his head as if he understood the man's concern, but the man eventually walked away. We were told to continue with our work. It was in this moment that I felt almost guilty for doing something that could negatively affect certain community members even though it was intended to be a beneficial project.

My final day as a voluntourist began with cleaning up an old Civil War fort that sat outside the city of New Orleans. At this point, many of us were physically exhausted from earlier projects in the week. Our duties for the fort were to cut away vines from the walls and keep the old crumbling bricks that made up the fort from moving too much. I remember wanting to take a long afternoon nap while we toiled away to preserve a dilapidated structure from the past. This particular project seemed detached from the work we had been doing earlier in the week because it was not necessarily concerned with continued recovery from Katrina. It was more of an activity to keep us busy and provide the overseers of the fort with maintenance work that they did not have to pay for.

Since it was Friday, I became distracted by thoughts of doing fun, leisurely things that tourists do in New Orleans. At times, I tended to perceive other voluntourists' intentions for volunteering as misguided because they would take long breaks while everyone worked or complain about doing repetitive manual labor. However, I thought about these things too. I was guilty of wanting some days to be over so I could hang out with my new friends from California or see live music somewhere downtown. These feelings of fatigue from doing volunteer work shifted our focus to engaging in the other half of the voluntourism equation—tourism. Being a voluntourist allowed me to focus some of my attention on understanding how volunteer work contributes to post-disaster, community development while dedicating my free time toward self-serving interests like shopping or eating or exploring the French Quarter. I was playing two roles—volunteer worker by day, typical tourist by night. The volunteer side of me wanted to absorb and learn and appreciate all of the work that we completed to give me a better sense of how volunteers impacted marginalized communities in New Orleans and made sense of their



outsider status in an unfamiliar context. The tourist part of me desired to simply enjoy my time in my favorite city and create a meaningful experience that I would remember forever.

Being both a voluntourist and a researcher of the voluntourism experience presented me with a unique perspective to understand the tensions between wanting to help others and helping yourself have a good time. By and large, selfless motivations to volunteer and selfish intentions to engage in leisurely activities exemplify the voluntourism experience. The voluntourist manages to understand their value as a human helper and reap the benefits of doing work by choosing where to allocate their help for how long and among whom. Essentially, voluntourism, as I experienced it for a brief week in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, works to satisfy the demands of voluntourists. Voluntourists help local community organizations achieve their recovery goals and projects by providing their free labor, but it would be difficult to say that the impacts of voluntourists on local communities are primary concerns of voluntourism. It largely favors fulfilling the wants of the voluntourist at the expense of overlooking the communities where voluntourists concentrate their attention, time, and voluntary labor.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Findings

I conducted semi-structured interviews with four Common Ground voluntourists. I emailed questionnaires (or surveys) to the people that I was not able to interview. The questions asked during the interviews were pulled directly from the questionnaires.

Below is a table illustrating the demographics of eight participants who completed interviews and questionnaires. The first four participants—Grace, Jake, Emily, and George—engaged in interviews while the bottom four participants—Nick, Jenn, Allie, and Luke—answered questionnaires (all names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of each participant):

Table 1—Demographic Profiles of Voluntourist Sample. Source—Mary Elizabeth Smithson.

<b>Demographic Profiles of Voluntourist Sample</b>						
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Highest level of education</b>	<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	<b>Regional identity</b>
Grace	18-24	Female	White	Enrolled in college	None	Northeast (New York)
Jake	18-24	Male	White	Enrolled in college	None	Northeast (New Jersey)
Emily	18-24	Female	White	Enrolled in college	Episcopalian	Northeast (New Jersey)
George	18-24	Male	White	Enrolled in college	None	South (Mississippi)
Nick	18-24	Male	Asian	Bachelor's degree	None	Northeast (Massachusetts)
Jenn	18-24	Female	White	Enrolled in college	Jewish	Northeast (New Jersey)
Allie	18-24	Female	White/Middle Eastern	Enrolled in college	Other (not specified)	West (California)
Luke	25-29	Male	White	Enrolled in college	None	West (California)

It is important to display the demographic profiles of this group because they reflect the identities of the rest of the people that stayed at Common Ground during the same week. Going from the left most category of “age” to the right most category of “regional identity,” I will discuss the demographics of this sample of participants and relate their social markers—age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, religious affiliation, regional identity—to the larger group of voluntourists that I was unable to interview or survey. Doing this should give a broader image of the entire group of voluntourists that I stayed with for a week at Common Ground.

All of the voluntourists were under thirty. As displayed in the table, most voluntourists fell between the ages of 18-24, with the exception of Luke from California who was in the next age bracket (25-29). I interviewed and surveyed four women and four men. However, there were a few more female voluntourists than there were male voluntourists in the overall group. All voluntourists were white, except for Nick who identified as Asian and Allie who identified as white and Middle Eastern. With the exception of one person who had recently graduated from college (Nick), the rest of the volunteers were enrolled as part- or full-time college students. Most individuals indicated that they were not affiliated with any religion. Emily, Jenn, and Allie were the only three participants who did identify themselves with a particular religion. The scope of regional identities was fairly diverse with voluntourists coming from all over America—the West Coast, the Northeast, the South. The largest group of students—ten to fifteen—came from New Jersey. Their school had an “Alternative Break Club” that was entirely student-led and student-funded. For some of the kids from New Jersey, this was their

third or fourth “tour” of doing volunteer work in New Orleans. For others, it was their first time to come to the South. The second largest group was comprised of three students from California who had heard about Common Ground through an anthropology course they had taken. The remaining voluntourists were a brother and sister from New York, a couch surfer from Massachusetts, and my boyfriend and I from Mississippi.

Some of these demographic categories (such as education level, age, race, and regional identity) contained social variables (like college student, whiteness, 18-24 years old, the Northeast) that many voluntourists identified with. The common variables that a majority of voluntourists share are important to notice. When added together, these intersecting variables create a representation of the “typical” voluntourist (at least for this group): a young, white, college student who is not a local. In contrast, a couple of the demographic categories (like gender or religious affiliation) did not produce one variable that most voluntourists shared. The next series of paragraphs will look at each demographic category and will expose which social variables were most common in my voluntourist sample.

Education, as Michel mentions, is the most reliable and consistent indicator of volunteerism because it serves to increase an individual’s awareness of social issues while also enhancing their empathy toward others (2007:637). In other words, various studies have shown that people who have attained higher levels of education, particularly above a high school education (Agostinho and Paço 2012:252), are more inclined to volunteer. My study sample of voluntourists, who were either currently in college or had recently graduated from college, reflects this finding.

Age seems to be correlated with the education level category. With most of the volunteers being between the ages of 18-24, it could be reasonably argued that these individuals followed a “traditional” path of enrolling in college after graduating high school around the age of 18 (Nontraditional Undergraduates 2002). Hence, most of the people who were between 18-24 were also in college. Young adults (16-24 years old) who attend college in the U.S. constitute one of the most active groups of volunteers supposedly because of their higher levels of idealism and energy (Agostinho and Paço 2012:252).

Race is another relevant factor in determining the general social make-up of voluntourists. Nearly all of the voluntourists I studied identified as white. One of the original founders of Common Ground Relief recognized the ongoing tension of overwhelmingly white voluntourists placing themselves in the communities of largely black residents and understood the problematic implications of this juxtaposition. Historically, volunteers with “white privilege” who have worked with marginalized communities have tended to displace locals by taking over the work, abandoning a community without ensuring that the hosts could effectively address issues in the volunteer’s absence, or using their privilege to personally benefit from the work being done (Crow 2006). Thus, race is a critical component in analyzing voluntourism because it often visibly separates the privileged “helpers” from the disadvantaged “helpless.”

Regional identity is helpful in showcasing that most voluntourists are travelling long distances across regional and state lines to engage in volunteer work. Most voluntourists came from the Northeast (three unrelated groups of voluntourists

traveled from New York, New Jersey, or Massachusetts); the rest came from the West (California) and the South (Mississippi). The extensive physical distance that stood between voluntourists' home communities and their host community (the Lower Ninth Ward) adds to long-standing discourses about unequal relationships between "developed" Northern spaces and "developing" Southern spaces. In other words, the legacy of colonialism has constructed a problematic notion that "the world is (naturally) divided into a more affluent "first world" or "North," and a much poorer "third world" or "South," and that the former ought to be responsible for the latter as the attainment of its privileges was made at the expense of the latter" (Sin 2009:985). Voluntourism can be understood to facilitate these unequal power relations between privileged outsiders who feel obligated to care for, teach, help, and serve "poor" locals in host destinations. Many of the voluntourists I met *literally* travelled from northern communities to volunteer in a distant southern setting; their geographical journeys symbolically mirrored the aforementioned idea that certain spaces, which are portrayed as ill-equipped, impoverished, needy, and hopeless (the Lower Ninth Ward/New Orleans/the South), merit outside intervention from spaces that are assumed to be stable, affluent, sovereign, and successful (the North).

For this case study on voluntourists, gender does not emerge as a crucial factor in determining whether or not women or men are more inclined to volunteer because the participants involved were half female and half male. Although this half-and-half ratio of women to men appeared in my sample, the entire group of voluntourists at Common Ground had a few more women than men. Studies that have examined gender in

volunteer groups have yielded different results—some groups are comprised of more women while others are comprised of more men (Agostinho and Paço 2012:252).

The final demographic category, religious affiliation, shows that these voluntourists, as a whole, do not share a common religious identity. Five out of eight participants admitted that they were not affiliated with any religion, which is indicated by “none”; the remaining three participants identified as Episcopalian, Jewish, and “Other.” I was unable to discover or examine a solid relationship between voluntourists and religious affiliation partly because Common Ground is a secular organization and partly because most of my participants claimed no religion at all. However, the literature suggests that religious participation generally increases a person’s potential to volunteer (Clerkin et al. 2013; Michel 2007).

Overall, higher levels of education, being between 18-24 years old, whiteness/white privilege, and a regional identity that is distinct from the regional identity of a host community are four social variables that most of these participants shared. A higher level of education appears to be the *most* common variable among these eight voluntourists and the most consistent indicator of someone’s volunteerism in general (Michel 2007:637). Certain categories such as marital status, income level, membership in community clubs/organizations, health, and employment status were not addressed in this demographic breakdown. It would be beneficial to find out which variables from these categories would be most common among my sample of voluntourists.

## CHAPTER IX

### Perceiving Vulnerability

The following three excerpts from interviews and surveys construct vulnerable images of the people and places of New Orleans due to the impacts of Hurricane Katrina. Dawdy notes that vulnerability means the “characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard” (2006:724). These opinions suggest that many people from New Orleans faced immense vulnerability after Katrina hit and were essentially hopeless, requiring outside efforts to enter the scene and clean up the damage. As an anthropologist, I am interested in how these voluntourists create meaning through their personal descriptions of an unfamiliar place that they are trying to help recover.

When asked about the similarities and differences between Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy, Jake responded:

*Up North, everyone, I feel like it has to do a little with the socioeconomic status of it, because when you look at those communities, they're all beach-front, million dollar houses. The people have so much disposable money that, like, even if they lost their house and got no money for it, they would still be able to build a house in the exact same spot. But then down here, it affected so many more people... And plus, like half the city [New Orleans] isn't really rich enough to afford, um, bouncing back. But, I think, up North, too, there was big need to, like everyone felt the need to come out and help. And everybody really responded to it, to help out their neighbors and everything. Um, but then down here, not so much, you know. I feel like, in the days after Katrina, it was all about, you know, the travesties of the people dying and like all that stuff happening.*

--Jake from New Jersey



When discussing the impacts of Hurricane Sandy, Jake constructed an image of the North that symbolized affluence and civil responsibility—“so much disposable money,” “everybody really responded to it.” He then juxtaposed that image of northern stability with a picture of financial uncertainty and human casualty in New Orleans that followed Hurricane Katrina—“half the city isn’t really rich enough to afford bouncing back,” “it was all about...the travesties of people dying.” His northern experiences helped inform his perception of New Orleans as a vulnerable place because the response to Hurricane Katrina was undoubtedly a stark contrast from the response to Hurricane Sandy. He personally witnessed effective and immediate response efforts to the aftermath of Sandy, but he remembers seeing, from afar, tragic media portrayals of what Katrina did to the physical and social landscapes of New Orleans.

Jake told me that he was in charge of preparing the weeklong trip for his group—around fifteen college students from New Jersey—to come to New Orleans; he also told me that he had been down to New Orleans five other times for voluntourism trips. Because he had been investing large amounts of time, energy, and money in New Orleans, it made me wonder if his initial perception of a vulnerable, helpless New Orleans had shifted to a more positive light since his first time here. He reluctantly admitted that, “it’s sort of like weaning off how much work needed to be done. It’s slowly getting better.” The overall tone of Jake’s thoughts on New Orleans was calmly hopeful—he felt like he was witnessing some profound changes, such as people finally moving back to areas that were once deserted and the changing scope of the volunteer work that needed to be done. He described himself as a “continued customer of New Orleans” who will keep coming back even if voluntourism opportunities run out.

When asked to describe a personal account of recovery from Hurricane Sandy and compare it to her perceptions of what happened in New Orleans, Emily replied:

*The response after that [Hurricane Sandy] was like really amazing because, um, the government really stepped up and tried to rebuild. And they did rebuild the boardwalk. And then, a year later, almost a year later, there was a fire that burned the walk that they had just rebuilt. But there was definitely a better response and that's partially, I think because, there's more money in our tri-state area. And, you know, there's probably even a racial thing to it. The only people in the Lower Ninth Ward are like poor black families. And, like, when the operations director told us that they actually owned their property I was really surprised. I was like I thought they were pretty poor?*

--Emily from New Jersey

Emily rode with Jake and the group of students from New Jersey. This trip was her first time to come to New Orleans, so she was a bit more “shocked” to hear about things that did not fit her initial perceptions of the city or the Lower Ninth Ward. Like Jake, she presented the responses to Sandy and Katrina as vastly different. She attributed much of the positive Sandy response to having “more money in our tri-state area.” Then, she jumped to suggesting that “poor black families” in the Lower Ninth Ward probably endured racial discrimination, which factored into the more negative Katrina response. She was surprised to hear that many of these “poor black families” actually owned their houses before the storm hit: “I thought they were pretty poor?” Emily’s limited knowledge of New Orleans certainly influenced the way that she viewed the city and the people within it. Uninformed perceptions like these perpetuate the idea that the people of the Lower Ninth Ward are more vulnerable than they may be in reality; regardless, the devastation that the majority of Lower Ninth Ward citizens suffered should not be undermined.

When asked, “Was there a reason you chose New Orleans as a place to engage in unpaid help/volunteer activities?” Luke said:

*Yes, the opportunity was given to help those who were victimized by hurricane Katrina. They didn't receive much in the way of federal assistance and FEMA outright failed these people. I wanted to be able to say that I gave back and was able to at least lend a helping hand in some way.*

--Luke from California

Luke, one of the three Californians, also came to New Orleans for his first time when he volunteered with Common Ground. His construction of human vulnerability is evident in his word choice: “those who were victimized,” “FEMA outright failed these people,” and “lend a helping hand.” As Luke understood the situation in New Orleans, many citizens were deprived of direct relief after Katrina, so they had to endure this negligent abuse until outsiders intervened to help. He almost makes it sound as if New Orleans is still in a “disaster” state today, rather than eight years ago. His intentions to help seem genuine, but he appears to hold an idea of a freshly ravaged New Orleans that is outdated but nevertheless important for remembering how many people became aware of what happened and who was affected—through media portrayals that presented the destruction as tragic, sweeping, and seemingly never-ending.

These three participants spoke about their particular perceptions of New Orleans and its citizens immediately after Katrina devastated the city. Although each perspective is slightly different, all three voluntourists depicted New Orleans as a vulnerable city filled with vulnerable people that probably could not have survived the storm unless outside help came to the rescue. The city did, indeed, need as much assistance and relief as it could acquire, especially when considering many people's and group's reactions to

the failure of the local and federal governments in addressing the post-disaster city. As valuable as outside help was in the context of an urgent disaster zone, some organizations found it challenging to handle the large influx of volunteers in a time of crisis (Simo & Bies 2007). This complicates these images of a vulnerable New Orleans because it shows how good intentions to mitigate vulnerability are not always met with accommodating plans to carry out those intentions. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see how these voluntourists, who are not from the South or New Orleans, still remember the sensational stories about New Orleans eight years after the Hurricane exacerbated the physical, social, and political landscapes of the city.

The voluntourist's rendering of vulnerability forms the foundation for the perpetuation of helping narratives, which are addressed in the next section.

## **CHAPTER X**

### **Helping Narratives**

In my interviews and surveys with voluntourists, various themes arose that explained the complexity of individual motivations for engaging in voluntourism. Grace from New York wanted to learn about a new place through travel and gain a better awareness of people's struggles outside of her own community. Jake from New Jersey felt like there was nothing better to do, and since he had been doing community service work since his Eagle Scout days, he felt like getting involved in a voluntourism experience would be like "second nature." Emily from New Jersey got involved because she felt a call from God to do so, she thought it would be fun, she wanted to meet people, and she just likes to volunteer in general. George from Mississippi mainly wanted to engage in some physical activity and also see New Orleans from a different perspective. Luke from California was interested in travelling to a new place, meeting new people, and seeing live music. Allie from California wanted to travel to a city she had always desired to see. Jenn from New Jersey felt like being a voluntourist would allow her to meet other students from her school and bond with them over volunteer work. Nick from Massachusetts was couch surfing, so he wanted to meet up with his friend in the city, find a place to stay, and have something to do. And, finally, I wanted to understand why all of these people came to New Orleans to participate in volunteer work that no longer dealt with addressing urgent needs.

Every voluntourist included the desire to "help" in tandem with their other motivations for engaging in voluntourism; this has been observed in other studies about

volunteer tourist motivations (Sin 2009). Below are the helping narratives for each person in my sample (the first four are from interviews and the last four are from questionnaires):

**Grace:** *And I think being aware helps, like now like, gives more perspective and realize, like, oh there's also other people in other places that really need help, you know? And obviously helping people, I wanna like help them...It's cool cause like, it's just one person but it's so big. Like if that was me, like, having, like, a group of kids come help me do something that would've taken forever. That woman that we're gonna help next week, like she's been waiting eight years.*

**Jake:** *You come down here and you're like, "This guy is like living in his foyer, and that's it, and he just sleeps on the dirt ground because there's no floor." And you're sort of like, "Oh well, you know, my life doesn't really have that kind of problem." It, like, puts everything in perspective for me.*

**Emily:** *I enjoy helping people but then I also enjoy helping the environment, like what we were doing. We were picking up trash near trails and building marsh grasses.*

**George:** *I actually got a chance to talk with a guy who was saying... Well I asked him, "How do you feel about these volunteers coming in?" But, I'd said that maybe you know historically in some places they don't necessarily appreciate the outside help because, you know, of the whole self-reliance kinda thing. And he said that, you know, that they like it. Especially in the Ninth Ward, they love when people come to go help them because of, you know, it pretty much gave them the feeling that people cared... helping. That's just the thing. And especially something like Common Ground where it was a whole, it was a very broad spectrum of outreach. I would say you know from helping one individual, an older man, who needed his garage torn down. To making plant beds to restore the wetland bayou that's surrounding one side of the Lower Ninth Ward. So, just the broad work helped. I don't, I guess going back to it, it made me feel good that I was actually doing something. I felt like I was making some sort of impact, even if it was a small one.*

**Luke:** *My motivation was to give back to people of this country who suffered greatly from a natural disaster. I often think to myself how so many people in this country are simply motivated by self interest in all walks of life and I wanted to defy that thought and give selflessly.*

**Allie:** *The fact that even the smallest form of help I can give to a community that lost everything was engaging.*

**Jenn:** *My motivations for engaging in volunteer work were to help a city that had been destroyed by a historic natural disaster.*

**Nick:** *All people need help, and volunteering is an experience we can all benefit from.*

Most of these narratives display a conscientious awareness to be proactive and help others because it at least does something, even if it is small, to improve their situations. In the ways that these voluntourists discuss “help,” it turns into a vague concept that could mean anything from doing general volunteer work to painting a person’s house to planting marsh grasses. Essentially, helping becomes another way of saying that one is offering their free labor to do work that is intended to positively impact individuals or the larger community. At face value, helping sounds like a truly genuine, commendable intention. Yet, when does helping become more than just “lending a hand” and runs the risk of perpetuating colonialist ideals? The mere ability to help is rooted in uneven social advantages that voluntourists possess while the people of these communities probably do not. Most of the voluntourists I spoke with understood that there existed a tenuous relationship between neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward and the powers that be—such as the city and federal government. They wanted to fill the void where these institutions failed to deliver. Yet, most of them did not perceive that their own privileged positions can also create problems. I include myself in this privileged positioning. A voluntourist has the ability to volunteer and act on that desire to volunteer, which can result in creating “us” vs. “them” oppositions between voluntourists and hosts.

Volunteer tourism programs, or VTPs, have become increasingly popular as of recent. These programs have essentially become commodities that sending organizations promote and sell to eager individuals who can personalize their vacations based on preferred location, duration, and even type of volunteer work (Raymond and Hall

2008:531). Thus, voluntourists are both volunteers and tourists at the same time. The duality of being a volunteer and a tourist is both self-serving and serving others. Ideally, as tourists, they pick a travel destination that interests *them*, and as volunteers, they volunteer where they feel their work will make a lasting impact on *other* people. Nearly all of the participants in the study wanted to travel, because it would let them see somewhere new and different, do something fun, or become more aware of problems in other places, mirroring the motivations of voluntourists in other studies (Sin 2009:488).

These voluntourists *chose* to come to New Orleans because of its appeal as a fun-filled, cultural hotspot and they *chose* to concentrate their altruism here because they knew that Katrina had done some serious damage that still needs “fixing” eight years later. Their ability to choose where to volunteer creates an uneven relationship between hosts who have to convince voluntourists that their time, labor, and money will be well spent and voluntourists who have to decide “...which types of projects warrant their volunteer services, or indeed, what types of projects fulfill their imaginations of caring relationships” (Sin 2010:989). Because of the more stable, less urgent atmosphere that surrounds New Orleans now, these voluntourists probably felt more comfortable with their decision to volunteer at a time when they could appreciate the city while also feeling good about contributing to recovery efforts.

Essentially, voluntourism still largely operates in favor of the voluntourist even when voluntourists believe that their intentions are more focused on helping others. Mass tourism is criticized for replicating existing power hierarchies between privileged tourists and disadvantaged hosts, and tourists are chastised for having superficial perceptions about the things they want to see as spectators (Sin 2010; MacCannell 1976).



Voluntourism is seen as a possible solution to correcting the flaws of traditional tourism because it “presents a unique opportunity for exposure to social inequities, as well as environmental and political issues, subsequently increasing social awareness, sympathy, and/or support” (McGeehee and Santos 2005:764). Most of the voluntourists did seem to benefit from learning about the Lower Ninth Ward when they were actually there. Many noted that although what they were doing seemed small and pointless if looked at as an isolated occurrence, each small act of help added to the overall picture of getting New Orleans back on track. Yet, the things they learned and their desires to help did not necessarily change the structural inequalities that have existed in the Lower Ninth Ward long before Katrina hit.

As Conran points out, helping narratives, which become commodified and used in promotional material to attract volunteer tourists, perpetuate the problematic notion that an “us” vs. “them” dynamic exists between voluntourists (us) and locals in a community (them) (2011:1464). Whether we were aware of it or not, nearly all of us, the voluntourists, held a position of white privilege maintained by our whiteness. Whiteness describes a person physically and socially but also implies “a position in society in terms of one’s relationship with a culturally and materially privileged race” (Rose and Paisley 2012:140). The “us” and “them” binary is further polarized when considering race in terms of voluntourism. “We” were a group of white college students who were intent on cleaning up the Lower Ninth Ward, which helped “them,” the predominantly black residents and locals in the neighborhood. At times, it felt like we were knocking down social barriers and bringing justice to the community, when we entered their homes or their property to do work. For instance, as I discussed in a previous chapter, we tore

down a local man's shed with him and his wife for one of our daily projects. He thanked us for our willingness to do this, and consequently, we all felt proud of ourselves.

However, these "caring" relationships that are produced in voluntourism settings can be welcomed by voluntourists and hosts alike, but the potential to reify past and present power hierarchies is a strong possibility (Sin 2010:984).

Voluntourism has also been criticized for inadvertently perpetuating a sort of neocolonialism that allows voluntourists to take on the role of the "teacher" to direct host communities toward becoming more developed (Raymond and Hall 2008:531). I saw more of this kind of "teaching" behavior coming from organizers at Common Ground and not so much from the voluntourists themselves. The story that I told about our volunteer supervisor, who had been with Common Ground for three years and was originally from New York, wanting to plant trees in a nearby wetlands bayou to revitalize the disappearing wetlands is a prime example of this colonialist behavior in action. A middle-aged local black man, who happened to be nearby, told us about his experience with the area. He warned our supervisor that planting the trees might block fishermen from casting nets to catch the fish that financially support them. Our supervisor took heed to this, but he continued with his original plan to plant the trees, acting as the expert on what needed to be done in this area.

Finally, voluntourists directed their helping narratives toward the Lower Ninth Ward, which has historically been overlooked, marginalized, and disenfranchised from opportunities and resources that are afforded to more privileged neighborhoods. This kind of "giving attitude," inherent in voluntourists' descriptions of what they plan to do during their voluntourism stay, suggests that there are those who are capable of helping (the

voluntourists) and those who they deem worthy (the people of the Lower Ninth) of receiving the help (Sin 2009:495). For example, the students from New Jersey who have been coming back to New Orleans for the past six years have been contributing much time and effort to the recovery of various neighborhoods and places in the city. In a sense, the prolonged contact between the students and the city can be a good or bad thing. It can help foster a sense of awareness in the students to possibly stay in the city and become part of making it a resilient community, as so many tourism marketing strategies claim New Orleans to be. It could also produce a situation in which the projects they keep involving themselves with become largely worked by voluntourists and the locals who are supposed to benefit from the projects are not intimately tied up with how they were planned, how they were constructed, and how they continue to be used. When voluntourists do things that do not involve community members, it can create a dependency on voluntourists to keep coming back. Instead, the narratives of getting post-disaster communities rebuilt, recovered, and back on track should be *of* the community instead of being *about* the community (Jackson 2011:13). We, as voluntourists, need to make sure that we recognize the structural inequalities that plague the state of these communities, understand our positions as outsiders unfamiliar to these places, and also realize that it is up to the community members to determine how recovery should happen in their home spaces.

While voluntourists are in an advantaged position to volunteer, they tend to possess the trappings of white privilege, and potentially can create situations in which the bridge between voluntourists and locals is greater than expected. Voluntourism appears to be doing more harm than good. But this does not have to be the case. More than anything,

before volunteer tourists embark on these alternative vacations, they should be required to read about the reasons why the communities they are helping are so seemingly “vulnerable.” Before Katrina hit, the Lower Ninth Ward was purported to have the highest level of homeownership than any other area in New Orleans (Thompson et al. 2012:10). With this in mind, it is easier to believe that the Lower Ninth *can* bring its displaced residents back and *can* recover on its own terms. However, information like this is rarely included in promotions of voluntourism or media portrayals of the neighborhood. There are usually only dismal statistics that make the neighborhood out to be a lost cause or stories about the “poor” people in these communities losing their homes and thus their livelihoods (Breunlin and Regis 2006:748), which could heavily influence how outsiders perceive these areas. To make sure we do not deny the capacity of people in the Lower Ninth Ward to revive their own neighborhood, we have to:

...take seriously the role of people as infrastructure—that is, as a “platform for reproducing life in the city”—we can expect that...members will bring all their intelligence, skill, and knowledge, their ways of being and doing—what some would call their “social and cultural capital”—and their heart to bear on the task ahead” (Breunlin and Regis 2006:761).

With the thought of “people as infrastructure” in mind, voluntourists can contribute to creating this infrastructure but only if cautious steps are taken to mitigate colonialist power structures and circumstances that can result from detached outsiders entering a highly vulnerable place such as the Lower Ninth Ward.

## CONCLUSION

Although the urgency of recovering from Katrina is not as obvious as it was over eight years ago, people still see New Orleans as an important cultural hotspot that should be preserved, visited, and noticed. The promotion of voluntourism organizations in post-Katrina New Orleans is an interesting trend to observe, especially nearly a decade after the fact.

Most research on voluntourism focuses on opportunities abroad. This international focus has resulted in a void when it comes to in-country volunteer opportunities (Holmes et al. 2009:258). However, by taking a place-based focus and concentrating on New Orleans, a site popularly perceived as exotic/fun-centered, I complicate this narrative. Also, as suggested by other investigators of volunteer work in post-Katrina New Orleans, I have offered a qualitative analysis of first-hand accounts about individual motivations for engaging in volunteer tourism (Michel 2007:648).

I have found that helping narratives, which are told in tandem with other reasons for wanting to come to New Orleans, expose how many outsiders perceive the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans, and the South in a disadvantaged, vulnerable light. I have concluded that for the voluntourists who participated in this study, they decided to volunteer in a place that is not urgently affected (like it was right after Katrina) because it gives them the chance to see a new place and fulfills their appetites for consuming the “culture” of New Orleans. They decide to leave their own communities because for one, they believe that their own communities are not in need of help or attention, and for

another, they get to enjoy an entire experience that encompasses travel, helping others, and having fun.

In this thesis, I have not intended to discourage people who are interested in voluntourism to reject the idea altogether. What I have wanted to show is that there is room for improvement for voluntourists, who come to a place without a deep knowledge of the local culture or the social inequalities that consistently hurt local communities, to become more informed world citizens when engaging in voluntourism. Organizations that host voluntourists should work harder to involve local community members in rebuilding their communities instead of relying largely on volunteer labor. The tourism agencies that promote voluntourism should refrain from using helping narratives to sell the idea of voluntourism; instead, they should confirm that communities in which voluntourism opportunities exist approve of outside groups coming in and helping with recovery efforts.

Hurricane Katrina certainly devastated many communities and the individuals within those communities in more ways than one. It is of the utmost importance to let these communities, if they wish, to request outside help, but it is also important to let them decide *what* should be done, *how* it should be done, and *if* something should be done. If our intentions are to be considered, valued, and recruited by these people, we must listen, listen, and listen some more.

Future research on the topic of voluntourism should try to focus on comparative studies that analyze what volunteer tourists think about their contributions to host communities and what locals think about these contributions. It would be interesting to

compare and contrast the perceptions of voluntourists and hosts/locals to see where there is room for improvement in voluntourism settings. Also, it would be useful to study how locals feel about the efforts of community organizations and if they believe that these are effective or ineffective at solving community problems and incorporating local residents into the projects.

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## APPENDIX A

### Informed Consent for Participants

# CONSENT FORM

## Consent to Participate in Study:

### Disaster, Displacement, and Voluntourism:

### Helping Narratives of College Student Volunteers in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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#### Description

The purpose of this research project is to attempt to understand why some people volunteer away from their own communities and how they contribute to constructing meaningful places during the duration of their volunteer stay. We would like to interview you and/or have you fill out a short survey about your volunteer experiences.

#### Risks and Benefits

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. You are free to pause or stop the interview at any time. Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information which will ultimately result in analyzing how one formal volunteer organization (Common Ground Relief) benefits the local community in which it is situated (the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans) as well as the volunteers it recruits.

#### Cost and Payments

The questionnaire will take about 5-10 minutes to complete, and the interview may last from 30 minutes to over an hour. All interviews will be audio-recorded for note-taking purposes as well as reference purposes for quotes that may be included in the final thesis.

Thus, there is a possibility that you could be quoted if it is relevant to the study. There are no other costs for helping us with this study.

**Confidentiality**

We will keep your recorded interviews and/or answered questionnaires private to the extent allowed by law. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. Printed data will be stored in a cabinet or drawer that can only be opened with a key. Only Mary Elizabeth Smithson will have direct access to the data. There will be occasions when Mary Elizabeth Smithson and her advisor, Dr. Barbara Harris Combs, will review the data together.

**Right to Withdraw**

Participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your interview information, including the audio tape, will be destroyed.

The researchers may terminate your participation in the study without regard to your consent and for any reason, such as protecting your safety and protecting the integrity of the research data. If the researcher terminates your participation, any inducements to participate will be prorated based on the amount of time you spent in the study.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have been given a copy of this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and I have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

## APPENDIX B

### Questionnaire Used in Study

#### **Interview Questions/Questionnaire for Anthropology Thesis concerning Voluntourism in New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward**

Most questions are multiple-choice, with a few open-ended questions at the end. Feel free to provide as much detail in your answers as you please. All answers will be stored confidentially.

1. I identify my gender as...(circle all that apply)
  - a. Man
  - b. Woman
  - c. Other (specify if desired:                      )
  - d. Prefer not to disclose
  
2. What was your age as of January 1, 2014?
  - a. 17 or younger
  - b. 18-24
  - c. 25-29
  - d. 30-34
  - e. 35-39
  - f. 40-44
  - g. 45-49
  - h. 50-54
  - i. 55-59
  - j. 60-64
  - k. 64-69
  - l. 70 or older
  
3. Are you a:
  - a. US citizen
  - b. Citizen of country outside the US
  - c. Both
  
4. How would you describe your racial or ethnic identity?
  - a. White
  - b. Black/African American
  - c. Native American/American Indian
  - d. Alaska native
  - e. Hispanic/Latino
  - f. Asian
  - g. Pacific Islander
  - h. Other (specify if desired:                      )

5. How would you describe your religious affiliation?
- a. None
  - b. Roman Catholic
  - c. Protestant Christian
  - d. Other Christian
  - e. Buddhist
  - f. Hindu
  - g. Muslim
  - h. Jewish
  - i. Sikh
  - j. Other (specify if desired:                      )
6. Highest level of education:
- a. No schooling completed
  - b. 8<sup>th</sup> grade
  - c. Some high school, no diploma
  - d. High school graduate, diploma, or equivalent (for example: GED)
  - e. Some college credit, no degree
  - f. Trade/technical/vocational training
  - g. Associate degree
  - h. Bachelor's degree
  - i. Master's degree
  - j. Professional degree
  - k. Doctorate degree
7. How would you describe your occupation/employment status?
- a. Employed, part-time
  - b. Employed, full-time
  - c. Not employed, looking for work
  - d. Not employed, NOT looking for work
  - e. Retired
  - f. Disabled, not able to work
  - g. Student, full-time
  - h. Student, part-time
  - i. Employed and Student
8. How did you find out about this organization? (circle all that apply)
- a. Through my school
  - b. Through friends or family
  - c. Through a religious organization
  - d. Through my employer
  - e. Through a volunteer center
  - f. Through internet searching

- g. I contacted the organization directly
  - h. Other—please specify:
9. In the past twelve months, have you given any unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organizations? (formal volunteering)
- a. Yes
  - b. No
10. In the past twelve months, have you given any unpaid help as an individual (i.e. not through a group, club or organization)? (informal volunteering)
- a. Yes
  - b. No
11. How often do you give unpaid help/volunteer?
- a. At least once a week
  - b. At least once a month
  - c. Less than once a month
  - d. Don't know
12. Who would you say primarily benefits from the unpaid help/volunteering you offer?
- a. Other volunteers
  - b. The wider community in which help is given (e.g. groups, clubs, or organizations or people not directly connected with the volunteer activity)
  - c. Both
13. What type of unpaid work/volunteer activities do you like to participate in? (circle all that apply)
- a. Raising money or taking part in sponsored events
  - b. Leading a group or being a member of a committee
  - c. Organizing or helping to run an activity or event
  - d. Visiting people, or providing care or support
  - e. Teaching, tutoring, or helping with reading or other skills
  - f. Befriending or mentoring people
  - g. Giving advice, information, or counseling
  - h. Religious/missionary work
  - i. Secretarial, administrative, or office work
  - j. Providing transport or driving
  - k. Coaching or refereeing sports
  - l. Other practical help (such as environmental work, gardening, decorating)
  - m. Representing
  - n. Campaigning
  - o. Conducting research
  - p. Other—please specify:
  - q. I have not given any unpaid help before committing to this volunteer service
14. More specifically, what types of formal organizations do you like to dedicate unpaid help/volunteer service toward? (circle all that apply)
- a. Sport/exercise (taking part, coaching, going to watch)
  - b. Hobbies, Recreation/Arts/Social Clubs
  - c. Religion



- d. Children's education/schools
- e. Youth/children's activities (outside school)
- f. Health, Disability, and Social Welfare
- g. Local community or neighborhood groups
- h. The environment, animals
- i. Disaster relief
- j. The elderly
- k. Safety, First Aid
- l. Citizens Groups
- m. Trade union activity
- n. Justice and Human Rights
- o. Politics
- p. Other—please specify:

15. Can you indicate which of the following were important to you as reasons for starting/giving unpaid help/volunteering? (check one box for each row)

Table 2—Reasons for Volunteering.

	Very important	Quite important	Not sure	Not very important	Not at all important
Improving things/helping people					
Meeting new people/making friends					
Developing skills					
Gaining work experience / developing my CV					
The fact that my friends/family were volunteering					
To enhance learning for my education					
My religious beliefs					
My personal values					
The chance to gain an award, certificate, or accreditation					
Wanting to fill spare time					
It was part of my university course					
Research purposes					
I was asked					
Helping my local community					
Helping a community outside my own					
Visiting a new place/travel					
Improving things/helping people					
Meeting new people/making friends					

16. Thinking about your involvement in unpaid helping/volunteering activities in the past or present, can you say whether you think the following have increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (check one box for each row)

Table 3—Impacts of Volunteering on Participant.

	Increased greatly	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased	Decreased greatly
My communication skills					
My ability to work as part of a team					
My ability to make decisions					
My ability to lead or encourage others					
My organizational skills					
My confidence in my own abilities					
My willingness to try new things					
My self-discipline or motivation					
My knowledge of my degree subject					
My understanding of other people					
My sense of feeling part of my local community					
My range of friendships					
My trust in other people					
My trust in organizations					
My general wellbeing					
My willingness to give unpaid help/volunteer in the future					
My readiness for paid employment					
The skills I have that potential employers will value					
My clarity about what I want to do as a career					
My chance of gaining employment in my chosen field					
Contacts/networks that will be useful for employment					

17. Would you consider giving unpaid help/volunteering again in the future?
- Yes
  - No
  - Not sure

18. Was there a reason you chose New Orleans as a place to engage in unpaid help/volunteer activities?
- a. Yes—please briefly explain why:
  - b. No
19. Do you currently reside in the city of New Orleans?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
20. If you answered no to previous question, how would you describe your experience of the city of New Orleans before engaging in unpaid help/volunteer activities? (circle all that apply)
- a. Previously resided in the city
  - b. Travelled to city to enjoy its cultural landscape (music, food, arts, etc.)
  - c. Travelled to city for sporting events
  - d. Travelled to city for work purposes
  - e. Travelled to city to visit family/friends
  - f. Went to school/college in the city
  - g. Travelled to city to volunteer
  - h. Vacation destination
  - i. No prior experience
  - j. Other—please specify:

Open-ended questions:

21. In general, what were your motivations for engaging in volunteer work?
22. How long have you been volunteering for this organization?
23. What role, if any, do disasters (hurricanes, oil spills, etc.) play in creating the need for volunteer work?
24. Where and when do you think volunteer efforts are most important and most needed (does not necessarily have to be in New Orleans)?